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ABSTRACT

Using the schools to achieve racial balance, eliminate poverty, fight drug abuse, prevent pregnancy, and reduce youth suicide is simply too much to ask. Teachers and principals should be required to address educational issues, not unmet social needs. Moreover, those who demand the schools' improvement would be well-advised to pay significant attention to the social issues that have played such a critical role in the decline of the public school systems. If there is a wish to improve the educational performance of U.S. schools, first there must be improvement in the quality of life for U.S. youth. Only when this improvement occurs can an evaluation be made as to the degree to which schools are fulfilling their educational objectives. (JD)

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SCHOOL REFORM: CAN IT SUCCEED?

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SCHOOL REFORM - CAN IT SUCCEED?

The clamor for educational reform is subsiding. A Nation At Risk, High School, Horace's Compromise, and numerous other reports indicting our public education system are rarely mentioned now. Moreover, with increasingly substantial graduation requirements and teacher compentency tests in place or under consideration, states are now considering more pressing issues.

The emphasis on strengthening the school curriculum and changing teacher certification standards (the two most popular reform efforts) seems to emanate from a belief that we can solve our educational problems by "fixing" the schools. Actions of state boards of education and state legislatures imply such repair work is necessary; but, will it improve educational performance?

Teachers and principals have long argued that little attention has been given to the social issues which affect students, complaining that it is not possible to improve educational performance significantly without addressing the quality of life experienced by youth today. Nevertheless, very little attention has been focused on social issues, nearly every critic has chosen instead to chastise the schools and the teachers who staff them.

During the last few years, the decline in student academic performance has been painstakingly chronicled. Decline in student performance is alleged to be the result of poor curriculum and poor teachers. Analyses of this decline appear to have been conducted independent of attention to other aspects of our society. Not only have critics failed to consider the ways in which society is different than it was a generation ago, but they have also ignored the increased responsibility imposed on schools to address the problems created by social change.

If educational reform efforts are to be successful we must first broaden our view of educational problems and develop a deeper understanding of the changes society has experienced. Second, we must determine whether it is proper for schools to carry the burden of responsibility for social ills which, while evident in the classroom, are not the result of action or inaction by the schools. Third, if we determine that the schools are the best place to ameliorate such non-educational problems then we must be willing to provide the resources necessary for them to be successful. We cannot expect that they will accept this responsibility in addition to their educational mission with no increase in resource.

In order to appreciate the present situation it is instructive to return to 1954. In that year the Supreme Court rendered the now famous Brown vs The Board of Education decision. In Brown, the Supreme Court held that separate educational facilities and programs were inherently unequal; a landmark civil rights decision which, thirty years later, is still used to justify busing to achieve racial balance in our schools.

While it took subsequent legislation and court cases to bring us to the situation in which we now find ourselves, Brown was the beginning. Although Brown is generally considered a victory in the battle to obtain equal educational opportunities for minorities, it should also be seen as a major defeat for our schools! It established the precedent of using America's public schools to attack social problems not of the schools' making.

Forced busing and the resulting elimination of neighborhood schools are frequently blamed for many of our schools' problems. While this analysis may be accurate for some schools, the argument weakens when other facts are considered. For example, schools unaffected by court ordered busing have not escaped criticism. Student performance in suburban and rural schools, those with no significant racial or ethnic mix, has also declined. Thus, while busing to achieve racial balance is an important and widely accepted example of a social problem imposed on schools, it is only a single example. There are numerous other social problems which also impinge on our quality of life and that of our children. Moreover, schools are being asked, and in some instances required, to address these problems as well.

POVERTY

The debate on poverty seems unending. While one group argues the number of persons in the United States living below the poverty level is higher than ever, another group argues that the poverty rate is down. Undeniably, there are more children living below the poverty level than ever before. In 1982 over 13 million children below the age of 18 were living in poverty, nearly 3 million more than in 1970.

The majority of children living in poverty are minorities, primarily black and Hispanic. Recent information provided by the U.S. Census indicates that nearly 50% of all black and 40% of all Hispanic children live at or below poverty level! Since urban schools typically have large minority populations, these schools have especially serious problems. In New York, nearly 650,000 children live at or below the poverty level and in Chicago, the number is around 250,000.

The direct impact on schools is evident in the school lunch statistics provided by the Department of Agriculture. In 1983, over 50% of all school lunches were served free or fee-reduced. Eleven million lunches were consumed by students who came from families with incomes qualifying for a federal food subsidy. This represents an 800% increase since 1960, although the public school population has increased by only 15%.

School based breakfast and lunch programs are seldom critized as an intrusion on the schools. As a group, educators are pleased to help feed children because they know a better diet develops sounder minds and bodies. Nevertheless, the feeding of children has now become the responsibility of the schools, a responsibility which has grown over the years and which few educators anticipated. "Lunch room duty" like "bus duty" has become a significant and burdensome responsibility for teachers.

DIVORCE

The effects of divorce on children have been debated for years. While once a common lament, staying together "for the sake of the children" is rarely invoked now.

Although schools have not been asked to address the divorce problem specifically, they have no choice but to deal with the children affected by the breakup of a family. Twenty years ago, this problem was of little consequence; today it is one of the most critical problems facing our schools.

In 1983, 1.1 million children joined the ranks of children from broken homes. Between 1965 and 1983, the divorce rate doubled, but more important, the number of children affected by divorce increased by over 400,000 per year. Furthermore, the problems children have in coping with divorce are aggravated when coupled with minority status and/or poverty.

The school response to children who are experiencing divorce or live in single-parent households is necessarily individualized. Teachers, counselors, and principals all try to understand the feelings of the children and ready themselves to respond if needed. Since 50% to 75% of the children in some classrooms come from broken homes, teachers, the first line of intervention, are generally concerned enough to demand more information about their students and demand assistance in learning how they can help. In many school districts across the country "learning to deal with children from broken homes" is a highly sought after in-service program.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Sex education has been a hotly debated issue in the public schools for some time. The battle has never been whether children should receive information about sex, but rather who should provide such instruction: parents, church, or schools. Behavioral scientists, social workers, and educators generally believe the best way to insure that children receive some form of sex education is to incorporate it into the school curriculum, the same curriculum which covers English, math, social studies, and science.

However, parents, religious leaders, and political leaders frequently object. Such action is seen as an unwarranted intrusion into the rights of the family or church. Thus, the issue continues to be debated and each community responds in its own way, if at all. Unfortunately, while the debate rages, children continue to be sexually active at an ever younger age. Although birth contol devices are easily obtained, the pregnancy rate among unmarried teenage girls in the U.S. has climbed to 3.5 per 1000, an increase of 100% since 1960. According to the Guttmacher Institute, the United States now has the highest teenage pregnancy rate of any developed country in the world, a rate which demographers point out means that four out of every ten girls who turn 14 this year will be pregnant before they are 20. Furthermore, our teenage abortion rate is higher than the teenage pregnancy rate for most other industrialized countries in the world! And, while the teenage pregnancy rate is higher for minorities and those living at or below the poverty level, Caucasian females account of over 75% of all teenage abortions. Thus, according to many experts, the cycle of teenage motherhood and subsequent poverty continues.

Schools are caught in a dilemma. Should they choose to address the sex education needs of their students not only will they divert time away from the curriculum but they may also incur the harsh criticism of the community. If they ignore sex education they fail to address an increasingly serious non-school problem which accounts for more than 30% of the female dropouts in some schools.

One response, tried by over 30 schools and under consideration by many others, is the establishment of a health clinic on school grounds. Among other services, the clinic dispenses birth control devices, information, and counseling. Understandably, the creation of these clinics has generated a vigorous public debate on the appropriateness of such facilities. Despite the criticism, some school administrations believe the clinics are such an important contribution that even junior high schools are now being considered to house these facilities.

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

The truth about the use of drugs by students is elusive. Self-reported data are of dubious validity, but they do represent an important source of information on substance use and abuse. The National Center on Drug Abuse conducts many such studies; it indicates that although the use of alcohol and marijuana among high school seniors has decreased slightly in the last four years, it remains at approximately 70% to 25% respectively. More recently, a study in New York indicated alcohol consumption among young people remains a serious problem. In that study, 10% of the teenagers surveyed admitted getting drunk at least once a week, and 11% admitted being "hooked" on alcohol. Twelve percent of elementary school students surveyed admitted drinking at least once a week. While the actual number of teenagers who are regular users and abusers of marijuana and cocaine may remain obscure, the effects of overuse are not.

We do know that marijuana has become the second largest cash crop in the United States and that so much cocaine has entered the country that the price has fallen 40% in the last two years.

Every school in the country has had to deal with the drug problem. Responses differ, but the use of dogs, undercover narcotics agents, and searches of student lockers are now all too common. Moreover, the problem is not restricted to students and within the schools. In 1983, there were 4,658 drug arrests in and around the New York City schools. Surprisingly, only 186 of those arrested were students.

The "Chemical People" program is the most recent and perhaps most publicized effort to address the substance abuse problem. Not surprisingly, the site for virtually all "Chemical People" activities and programs is in the schools. It is also important to note that the schools are perceived by both those who sell drugs and those who would prevent their sale as the single most important point of access to young people. The activities of both groups intrude on the time available for learning.

CRIME

According to the records of the FBI, the violent crime rate in the U.S. declined 5% since its peak in 1982. While the decline is encouraging, the actual number of violent crimes remains alarmingly high. Furthermore, the 1.2 million violent crimes that were committed in 1984 represent a 150% increase in the violent crime rate since 1965.

More serious still is the fact that teenagers account for over 30% of all arrests for violent crimes, and 18 year-olds represent the largest single age cohort of persons arrested for committing violent crimes. We should not expect our schools to be immune from this antisocial behavior, and they are not. A 1983 study of crime in the Boston city schools reported that four out of every ten high school students admitted carrying a weapon to school sometime during the school year, and 50% of the teachers reported being the victim of a crime on school property or at a school function.

In 1985, Chicago took steps to address what it termed "youth gang violence." There were over 100 gang-related murders in Chicago during the previous year; all victims were young people, most below the age of 18. Many had been on their way to or from school, so truancy, already a problem in itself, worsened. A similar situation exists in Detroit where the school response has been to install metal detectors at the entrance doors.

TEENAGE SUICIDE

Perhaps the most disturbing information of all concerns the rising teenage suicide rate. Between the years 1960 and 1982, the suicide rate for children ages 15-19 rose 141%.

Suicide is now the fourth leading killer of teenagers. Curiously, while many social problems affect minorities to a greater degree than Caucasians, the teenage suicide rate is highest for white males. The problem has become so serious that a national task force has been proposed. California has recently mandated suicide prevention programs in its schools; New York, New Jersey, and Texas are considering similar actions. Many local communities in these and other states have already implemented broad-based community action programs to address this serious and growing problem. Predictably, virtually every program includes the active participation of school personnel and the use of school facilities and time as part of the intervention strategy.

Conclusion

Everyone agrees the public schools in the United States have experienced a decline in educational effectiveness, and the recent emphasis on quality is needed. However, most critics of the public schools lack an understanding of the complex social service roles which have been imposed on those who teach our children. These critics ignore the fact that we have required our schools to become the largest and most comprehensive social service delivery system in the world! In We the Teachers, Terry Hernden, a former Executive Director of The National Education Association remarks,

> "What is happening to our schools that we are obliged to run the largest juvenile delinquency program in town? To deliver the children to school and, once there, to feed them if they haven't been fed at home? To provide psychological counseling and otherwise do what society once held to be the responsibility of parents?"

Our teachers should be capable and dedicated professioals, and our facilities and resources should be adequate for the educational tasks we wish to accomplish. However, we must understand that "...our schools can't do it all." Using the schools to achieve racial balance, eliminate poverty, fight drug abuse, prevent pregnancy and reduce youth suicide is simply too much! Our teachers and principals should be required to address educational issues not unmet social needs.

Moreover, those who demand our schools' improvement would be well advised to pay significant attention to the social issues that have played such a critical role in the decline of our public education system. If we wish to improve the educational performance of our schools, we must first improve the quality of life for our youth. Only then can we fairly evaluate the degree to which our schools are fulfilling their educational objectives.